

Ashcroft Criticized For Bob Jones Speech

Concern Centers on Religious Views

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John D. Ashcroft, President-elect Bush's pick to be attorney general, told graduates at Bob Jones University in 1999 that America was founded on religious principles and that "we have no king but Jesus," according to a transcript of his remarks released yesterday.

Ashcroft, who has come under intense criticism for accepting an honorary degree from the controversial school in Greenville, S.C., also told approximately 900 graduating seniors and their families, "I thank God for this institution and for you."

"Unique among the nations, America recognized the source of our character as being godly and eternal, not being civic and temporal," said Ashcroft, then a Missouri senator. "There's a difference between a culture that has no king but Caesar, no standard but the civil authority, and a culture that has no king but Jesus, no standard but the eternal authority."

Ashcroft's appearance at Bob Jones on May 8, 1999, had been the focus of an intensifying tug-of-war between Senate Democrats and Bush transition officials this week when it became clear that the school had tapes of the ceremony but refused to release copies to the public. A transcript of the taped remarks was included in the first stack of background documents on Ashcroft to arrive at the Judiciary Committee yesterday afternoon.

Ashcroft opponents and some Democratic senators said the remarks reinforce concerns that Ashcroft will let his conservative religious views unduly influence his decisions as attorney general.

They also questioned Ashcroft's judgment in accepting a doctor of laws degree and \$750 in traveling expenses from Bob Jones, which until recently forbade interracial dating among students and whose leader has called the Catholic Church a "cult."

"Bob Jones University has become a symbol of divisiveness and intolerance in our society, especially during the recent presiden-

tial campaign," said Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), chairman of the Judiciary Committee that is scheduled to hold hearings on Ashcroft next week. "The committee will want to explore whether Senator Ashcroft's views have changed since he proudly accepted its honorary degree."

Ashcroft said last year that he was not aware of the school's views on dating and Catholics when he accepted the degree, and did not agree with them. Bush also came under fire for appearing at the school while campaigning in South Carolina.

Bush transition officials yesterday pointed to a 1998 speech by Ashcroft to business leaders in Detroit, when he said, "It is against my religion to impose my religion."

"Senator Ashcroft and Senator Joe Lieberman have both given speeches that address the importance of faith in the lives of individual Americans," said Bush spokesman Ari Fleischer, referring to the former Democratic vice presidential candidate. "Faith is an important part of the fabric of our society."

Ashcroft was joined at the graduation ceremony by former South Carolina governor David M. Beasley (R) and Reps. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) and Asa Hutchinson (R-Ark.), all of whom received honorary degrees.

"I'm troubled greatly by this Bob Jones University incident," said Sen. Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.), a member of the Judiciary Committee. "It is one thing for Senator Ashcroft to dismiss this as an extemporaneous speech he couldn't find notes on, and another thing to be so proud of it that he included it in his Christmas card," as Ashcroft did in 1999.

Some House and Senate members said Ashcroft's appearance at Bob Jones University raises questions about his racial sensitivity, but Republicans defended Ashcroft on the issue. "If the opponents want to inject race into this debate," said Sen. Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.), "then John Ashcroft's friends will have to respond."

Staff writer Helen Dewar contributed to this report.